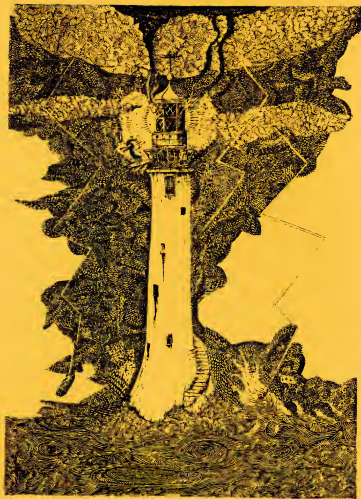


DARK DREAMS



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Editorial

FIRSTLY, WE WOULD like to thank everybody who has written to us since our last issue. We welcome all letters of comment, so please do not hesitate in putting pen to paper.

This issue we have concentrated on bringing you longer stories, as a number of you have requested, and we hope that you approve of the five excellent pieces that go together to compose this, our fourth issue.

Peter A. Hough starts us off with SNOWMAN, a dark, powerful tale of psychological horror. Peter has had fiction published by, amongst others, SHORT STORIES MAGAZINE, MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, FANTASY TALES and is included in the FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT GHOST STORIES 15.

THE CITY OF GHOULS by Dallas Goffin is another episode in the career of that mercurial minstrel, Pashonnio of Erd, who was first encountered in DARK DREAMS 3. Dallas has not only proved himself a capable teller of tales, but also as a first-rate artist, examples of which have appeared in our pages. Graphics are also due in WEIRDBOOK and DARK HORIZONS.

Simon Gosden's THE NIGHT BIRD may surprise a few of you who know the author as a bibliophile who regularly issues a catalogue of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror literature in association with Andy Richards. Simon also edits OUT OF THE WOODWORK, a magazine devoted to articles on the genre.

We're sure to a lot of readers David Rowlands needs little introduction. He is a regular contributor to GHOSTS & SCHOLARS, and has more than once appeared in Karl Wagner's THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES series. Here with TRAVELLERS FARE we are delighted to present a previously unpublished tale featuring the ever popular Father O' Connor.

Our final story is THE DEAD FIELD by David Sutton. David is perhaps better known to the small press field as associate editor of the British and World Fantasy award winning FANTASY TALES. He also edits the British Fantasy Society magazine DARK HORIZONS; as well as editing during the 1970's three original anthologies of horror for Sphere and Corgi books. However, this aside, David is a fine writer in his own right, as his story here, with its brooding atmospheric touches goes to prove. His own tales have appeared in both professional and amateur publications. THE DEAD FIELD was first published in the initial number of GOTHIC in 1979.

Completing this issue we have some excellent poetry by John F. Haines, t. Winter-Damon, Dave Reeder, Steve Sneyd and Stuart Watts. And of course some stunning art from Mark Dunn, Alan Hunter, Allen Koszowski, Dallas C. Goffin, Stella Hender and Nicholas Blinko.

There are limited numbers of back-issues still available, for further details please write to the correspondence address.

Finally, a brief word concerning submissions. Firstly, could artists please, where possible, send us copies and not the originals. This then avoids the likelihood of work becoming damaged or lost in the post. And second, could American authors please enclose two IRC's if they wish their work returned, as one is insufficient for return postage.

And that just about wraps up this issue. So until next time... dark dreaming to you all!

Snowman

Peter A. Hough

CHESWICK GAZED FIXEDLY through the dirty pane of glass, chewing moronically on a piece of gum. He looked every bit his fifty years, and more, the lines etched deeply into his pale face bore the signs of worry and frustration.

Outside the old pre-war building where Cheswick occupied most of the top floor, he watched a group of boys across the road building a snowman on some derelict land. Their yells and occasional obscenities reached him across the slushy roadway and gave him a sickly sensation in his stomach. Apart from the rhythmic motion of his bony jaw he remained motionless, observing unobserved, the light turned off in the room.

As dusk fell the youngsters trudged off until none remained except for the snowman, its figure turned towards Cheswick, its crude facial features tilted upwards to meet his gaze. He turned away and snatched at the curtains to cover the window as if they would form an impenetrable barrier between himself and the outside.

In the unkempt kitchen he opened a tin of baked beans and ate them cold out of the can with a spoon, drinking from a bottle of cheap wine to help them go down. He felt unnerved, scared deep inside. Over the past weeks the fear had pierced the fog of alcoholic euphoria, stirring up the slime at the bottom of his subconscious.

The nightmares that had haunted him through adolescence had returned, rolling before him like an old black and white film. Their re-emergence had come with the first snowfall two weeks before. It was the worst weather the country had experienced for forty years. Things would not seem so bad, he conjectured taking another swig of the bottle, if Una had not walked out on him five years before. He needed her comfort, but his drinking then the loss of his job had driven her away.

He finished his tea, listened to the radio news, then pulled on his anorak and walked quietly down the narrow carpeted stairs to the street below.

Outside there were few cars and even fewer people. He walked across the road then up a slope onto the derelict land which had become the local tip. Cheswick heard glass crunch beneath the layer of snow, and saw in the wan light cast from a lamp-post, the corner of a mattress sticking up out of the dirty white snow.

The boys had made an impressive job of the snowman. It had an elongated body with a broom handle plastered with snow pushed through the abdomen for arms. He walked around it, noting that a trick of the light made the flat expression on its face appear to change as he moved.

Marbles had been used for eyes. They drew his own tired grey orbs into a mesh of sparkling colour until he pulled away. The mouth was odd too; etched into the ice in a downward arc like a grimace. He moved closer noticing a dark spot spreading from the corner of the mouth onto the chin of the thing, something thick and congealing.

Suddenly he lashed out at the snowman, kicking and punching like a veteran street mugger, until it was just a smashed up heap of snow.

During the night the temperature plunged to minus ten. Cheswick lay wrapped in several layers of blankets, his mind snapping back and forth from the present to the past until the sequence of events merged chaotically. He cried out for Una to stop it crawling out of his childhood, but of course she wasn't there.

It, the unnamable something, succeeded in dragging him into the depths, only for his consciousness to rise to the surface again like a bubble.

A drunk vomiting out in the street woke him up once, then later he heard the icy wind moving furtively around the terraced rows hurling flurries of fresh snow against the bedroom window.

In the early hours of the morning he fell fully asleep, only to dream he was attacking the snowman. Before he could knock it through, it began to move, the snow cracking, falling away, coming towards him...

He stayed in bed until late in the morning, smoking, listening to the radio, wondering what to do, dozing a little. If he had the money he would probably be an alcoholic by now he thought bitterly. Then he chuckled and brought up some phlegm. Later he dressed, had a hard boiled egg, and went out to collect his dole money.

He stayed out most of the day, queuing for ages for his benefit, then wandering the city centre, visiting the library to read the newspapers, walking around the department stores. It was nearly tea-time when he arrived back at the flat. Suddenly the pay-phone began to ring out in the corridor.

Something made him pause before going to answer it. This in itself was strange; that he should think of answering it at all. He almost never received telephone calls. Usually after a few rings it was answered by one of the other tenants. Madge was always expecting a call from her sister in London. But this time it kept on calling...

He walked down the short corridor to the 'phone. In the moments between lifting the receiver and placing it to his ear the silence of the passageway enveloped him like a bubble, shutting out the internal scufflings and distant door slamming of the dilapidated building.

"Hello?" he said.

"Kenny?"

The blood drained from him as he recognised her soft nasal tones, even though the noise on the line made her sound distant, cold.

"Una..."

"I know, it's been a long time, Kenny, a very long time..."

"But...but where are you?"

"I wanted to talk to you Kenny, surprise you, but the train I was on has had to stop somewhere near Stoke. Apparently the line's blocked and it'll be hours before it's cleared."

"Don't worry about it, the snow's not as bad here, I'll come and fetch you."

He asked her the name of the station and assured her it would only take him about an hour to arrive. The receiver hit the cradle and Cheswick began to tremble. Nothing for five years then a call out of the blue. He grabbed a piece of cake whilst rummaging about for the car keys. The car, an old escort, was kept nearby in a garage rented from an old lady for a few pounds a year. The car was not used often. Its running costs were too high, and he had been banned for drunken driving a year ago.

After the fourth attempt the engine fired. He rattled out of the back streets onto the main road, his mind awash with the unreality and absurdity of the telephone call. It was very dark now, and a light pattering of snow was falling. Fortunately the motorway was still open although reduced to two lanes in places.

Time became a blur. It was as if he had been drinking heavily or taking drugs. A minute could have passed or an hour, but suddenly he was aware of an exit road number, the number he was sure he had seen on the map he had studied before leaving. He left the motorway and was soon swallowed in a maze of narrow country lanes that bore a sinister familiarity. His mind struggled to grasp at the road numbers and names but he was lost. Then the car coughed and spluttered sliding to a halt in a snow drift. The fuel gauge registered empty.

Cheswick, mentally and physically exhausted, collapsed over the wheel and fell into a deep and disturbing sleep. He awoke with a parched throat and nagging headache. Daylight filtered through the layer of snow which

had built up over the windscreen. He wound down the window and discovered that the snow had fallen inches deep since the car had stopped. After winding the window back up he searched around and found a flask in the glove compartment, half full of whisky. He knocked some back then attempted to make some sense of what had happened.

Thoughts of mental breakdown and temporary insanity chilled him, but other conclusions, just as frightening, took hold of his imagination. He cleared the windscreen with the wipers and took in the surrounding area. At first nothing struck him, but then he didn't expect it to after all those years...Had his mind really malfunctioned, letting his subconscious gain temporary control of his brain, bringing him back to this place of his childhood?

The nightmares, he conjectured, could have been a preamble to this forty year old anniversary. He began to doubt if he had heard Una on the 'phone at all...Perhaps he had imagined it, or perhaps it was something else masquerading as his wife in order to bring him here...

He took a long swig at the whisky and tried to still his trembling hands. Common sense told him to remain where he was until rescue arrived, but with most of the country in the grip of arctic conditions, he realised it could be days before a snow-plough came his way. He sounded the horn, but it was muffled by the snow, and faded as the battery became flat. Cheswick suddenly remembered a pair of wellington boots he kept in the boot. A decision came to him to risk it outside rather than remain and freeze to death.

Outside it was cold but crisp, giving the surrounding countryside an innocent Christmas card appearance, although the silence unnerved him. Cheswick had forgotten what it was like to live in the country. The boom of an overhead aircraft, or the distant drone from a carriageway would have made him happier. There was little except for the monotonous crunch of his boots sinking into the fresh snowfall.

After a while certain landmarks became familiar to him. Some things certainly must have altered in forty years, but he recognised a stand of trees and a distant hill with a small blip near its peak. The village where he was born, and from which he was subsequently taken from, was only three miles down the road. More snow began to fall and he tried to think of somewhere he might shelter, a nearby farm perhaps, but his mind drew a blank. He knew, however, that if he left the road and walked across the fields the journey would be cut by about half a mile. It was too tempting. He found a gap in a fence and left the road.

Everything was fine for a while, he was making good progress and was thankful his wellingtons had been left in the boot. The sky darkened then the snow thickened turning into a blizzard. Before long he became confused, not knowing in which direction he was traveling, one low moorland stone wall looking much like another. The icy wetness began to penetrate his clothes, and he realised that if shelter was not found soon he could fatally suffer from exposure.

Panicking slightly, he climbed a gate, slipped, and landed on the ground banging his head painfully. Then he caught a glimpse of something, a building of sorts, up ahead through the blinding curtain of snow.

It was a barn, and even though his head was hurting he knew which barn it was, but he thankfully pushed his way through the partly opened double doors anyway, and slumped against a wall.

The floor was frozen hard and littered with bits of straw which shifted around where the wind entered in a hundred different places. He hoped beyond hope it was all a grotesque accident finding himself there, and was determined that as soon as the storm abated to leave for the village.

He crouched on his haunches away from the doors where the storm gusted in and out, exploring the building. In one anorak pocket he discovered half a bar of chocolate. It tasted good after having not eaten for many hours, but his attention was on the creeping shadows gathering in the claustrophobic confines of the barn. Then above the storm he heard some-

thing else, something quite distinct, a clinking sound that came from the other end of the building.

Rats, he told himself, it was only rats, but he was beginning to feel afraid. His body shook from something more than the cold. Forcing himself to move he picked up a stick lying close by and began to tentatively explore the niches and dark corners. There was no one there, but he did discover a bottle on the floor. Most of its contents had spilled forming a small puddle. Cheswick stooped and smelled the bottle - methylated spirits - and the glass was warm as if only moments before someone had been holding it...

A sensation of vertigo swept over him, half-buried memories hurtled back; a vile memory of childhood that had plagued him through adolescence into manhood.

The hand holding the bottle shook violently, letting it fall to the frost hard floor. As it came to rest he thought he could hear voices, children's voices, from outside. He forced himself over to the doors and looked out.

Miraculously, the blizzard had stopped. A group of boys gripped his attention. They were dragging something resembling a bundle of rags that had left a channel in the snow leading from the barn.

Cheswick collapsed against the interior of the door, panting like a dog. heart pounding madly. This was too much, it was an hallucination, surely?

Including himself, there had been five of them, all those years ago. They had been playing truant from school, messing about in the snow, when Old Lucas was discovered asleep in the barn. Old Lucas, old before his time, the same age as Cheswick was now. Lucas the local bogey man...

He had seemed more catatonic than asleep, his brain befuddled over the years with meths and cider. The boys crowded around, prodding him lightly at first, but he was too stoned to notice. Then Pennington, the gang leader, brushed the others aside and gave the tramp a hard kick which elicited a groan.

"That's for last summer when the old bastard chased me off that tractor with that stick of his!"

He stood aside and spat while the others, including young Cheswick, took turns kicking the tramp, voicing their grievances - some real but most imaginary.

"I'll tell you what," Pennington had said, "see these bits of wood - we'll make a cross, stick it in the ground then tie the old bugger to it - he'll make a bloody good scarecrow!"

They had made a good job of the cross, Cheswick remembered. He could hear it now, being driven into the hard ground; a rhythmic thud, thud. He felt sick and afraid.

He peered around the barn door. There was Pennington, his lank red hair, sparse through some scalp disease, blowing wistfully in the chill breeze. His long thin fingers were wrapped around a piece of moorland stone which was being used to hammer the stake firmly into place.

Cheswick recoiled again from the scene. In his head the grotesque memory unravelled like a coiled magnetic tape. Between them they'd dragged the old tramp across the snow, then hauled him upright, tying him tightly to the wooden cross with some cart-rope.

They were just outside now, laughing at the pathetic figure bound to the stake, stubble like iron filings on his pointed chin and urine-stained trousers flapping about his spindly legs - looking exactly like a scarecrow.

Cheswick was drawn to the tableau and stood openly in the grey light of the doorway. A thin pale face turned towards him with narrow cruel eyes and curled lips - his own face of forty years ago. Across the field he heard his own thin piping juvenile voice.

"I've got an idea, Pen, why don't we make a snowman, I mean a real



snowman!"

Yes, it had been his idea, his suggestion. The regurgitated memory of that event was sickly reinforced as the play unfolded before him. Pennington ran his tongue over his lips, then smiled, a cynical smile. The youth placed a hand on that other, juvenile, Cheswick, and a tremor shook his own body at the recollection of looking up admiringly at the acned complexion.

"Good idea kid! Come on you lot, let's get some snow!"

They piled the snow against the semi-conscious man and patted it down hard, building higher, above the waist, the chest...And Old Lucas began to groan, a strange animal noise. He opened his mouth exposing black decaying teeth, but when he tried to speak and vainly struggle, Cheswick watched himself fill the cavity with more snow. The boys laughed, and Cheswick, in the doorway, closed his eyes tightly as the sound echoed horribly in his skull.

He would not let it happen again...and his fists clenched and unclenched in uncontrollable spasms. With a cry of anguish he turned around and ran, stumbling, across the field.

The boys had gone. Only the snowman remained - an alabaster statue almost invisible against the whiteness of the field.

That first time, forty years ago, they had abandoned the snowman, each thinking one of the others would return and free him from the stake. None of them did. The tramp was discovered two days later by the farmer who owned the land. Lucas was frozen solid, the look of terror on his face reinforced with rigor mortis. Cheswick, being younger than the others, escaped prosecution. The others had been sent to borstal.

His parents were forced to leave the village taking their wayward son with them. Maturity had brought horror of his crime, and it had manifested itself in nightmares, bed wetting and a hatred and fear of snowmen...

It seemed to take years, forty years, to reach the snowman. When he did reach it he began tearing at the snow, but it was hard, ice packed. Suddenly a large chunk came away in his hands where the head was, and with it a piece of yellow leathern skin. The old tramp was mummified, as if he had remained there, waiting for Cheswick to return.

The remainder of the skin tissue clung to the skull, one cheekbone exposed, the left eye socket empty. Then he fell backwards as the jaw began to articulate, ice and snow particles falling away like dried saliva or blood...

Cheswick screamed with fear and a revulsion at what they had done, at his inception. Then another cry joined his own, and he and the snowman were a baying chorus against all the cruelty and misery that had strangled and suffocated all the happiness and goodness from their lives. Slowly the ice-coffin began to crack and fall away.

The snowman faded, the blizzard returned, but Cheswick remained crouched, letting the snow settle on his shoulders.

FIRST, FIND YOUR DRAGON

Snug in their nest of gold, the black eggs throb with life
There's only a few frantic moments in which to switch
A live one for the dummy

Feel how the warm egg pulses with newborn fire!

Soon you will hear a cry of rage and loss
Then, you must run and hide - and never sleep

JOHN FRANCIS HAINES

The City Of Ghouls

Dallas Clive Goffin

A BITTER FEUD had been propitiated in the Desert of Rheld and the colourless sand was ensanguined with the blood of the alain. Over fivescore nomads of the Baktim Clan sprawled, hacked and lifeless, over the surface of a dune that was the size of the burial mounds of Crai Aird, with an almost equal number of Yerphi Tribesmen scattered amongst them. Both sides were garbed in shirts of mail and leathern kilts, with broken shields upon their arms and weapons still gripped in death-locked hands. Grim carrion-birds were busily feasting and the hot air reeked with the pungent odour of corruption.

Pashonno of Erd surveyed the scene from a distance and wondered idly whether it were prophetic of his own forthcoming fate. He had been lost in the desert since the preceeding day, when his camel had been bitten by an ash-viper and died a few hours later. Prior to this unfortunate accident, it had been his intention to rendezvous with a caravan at the Oasis of Shyn and travel with it to Baph-Dhassad, where, as a minstrel of some considerable reputation, he anticipated a favourable welcome. Now, with but two days' supply of water at the most, he had nothing to hope for beyond a swifter demise than the desert customarily allowed those stranded in its forbidding wastes.

He was in the process of turning away from the sight of the slain nomads when he perceived a figure crossing the crest of the dune and pawing amongst the dead. It was clad in voluminous black robes and wore over its head a cowl of the same hue. After it came what was apparently its mount and Pashonno was not reassured to recognize the beast as one of the dreaded man-eating gryphons which were indeed reputed to inhabit the desert. The gryphon's pelt was tawny and shone like luxurious velvet in the mid-day sunlight; its claws were armoured with silver scales and the brazen plumage of an eagle adorned its wide pinions and cruel, arrogant head, wherein two wicked eyes flamed like beads of topaz above the crest of a ruddy scimitar-bill.

Pashonno prayed fervently that he had not been seen, for he was obviously witnessing the activities of some less than benevolent denizen of the desert. To his relief, he remained undetected and presently saw the figure mount the gryphon and goad the creature back over the crest of the dune.

As the sun tarnished with the sluggish blood of afternoon, the weary minstrel began to trudge into higher, rocky ground. For the next few hours he wove between weathered boulders and around deep crevices, all the while climbing steadily. The land was a barren waste. Nothing grew in the stony rubble beneath his feet and there was no sign of animal life in the monotonous terrain. Darkness fell and he continued his stumbling progress until the smugly-smiling moon rose into the sable sky-blanket. Then he sat down upon a boulder to rest and partake of his remaining food and water.

It was when he had finished his meagre meal and was sitting contemplating his predicament that he heard the sound. It came from somewhere down the track he had recently ascended, but its source was invisible to him because of a bend in the trail. The sound was a rhythmic padding and, as it drew closer, he also heard an exchange of guttural voices.

"Hurry yourselves, you tomb-maggots!" instructed one voice, in an uncouth accent. "The queen will have our mates flayed if we spend too long on this sojourn."

"If she does the deed herself, it mayhap will be worth the experiencing," commented a second voice, punctuating the statement with an obscene

chuckle.

"Your perversions, brother Wartlip," reprimanded a third individual, in a grating, baas tone, "get increasingly worse with each fattening of the moon. It mystifies me why you cannot be content with pawing the shrivelled breasts of sand-dried corpses of Baktim concubines, or tasting the lips of embalmed Meggan princesses in their sepulchres of granite and iron - like the rest of us!"

"I prefer to sport with garnet-eyed succubi in the burrows beneath the goblins' graveyard," amended a fourth voice.

"You would," snorted the third speaker, contemptuously. "You, Scab-tongue, take after my bitch. She's partial to being scaled by worm-haired incubi and rolled in red-hot coals - and then there're other occasions when she importunes outside the sarcophagi of diamond-fanged vsmpires and..."

"Let's have some common decency back there, you offal-snufflers!" complained the first voice. "How am I to be expected to digest a gutful of corpse-meat when all you do is make disgusting discourse?"

The speaker belched, as if to emphasize his point.

Pashonnio, meanwhile, liking not the trend of this discussion, scuttled behind the boulder which he had been sitting on and apprehensively watched the track. A few heartbeats later, a topaz-studded head was silhouetted against the moon, followed swiftly by a leonine body. The minstrel immediately recognized the beast and the robed and cowed figure which was perched upon its back, like a brooding manifestation of death. Close behind, three more of the heavily-awathed figures urged their mounts up the incline.

When the last of the gryphons was a hundred strides or more past him, Pashonnio crept from behind the boulder and stealthily began to follow them, hoping to learn the direction to the nearest oasis or river.

"The unfairness of mortals puts me off my manflesh!" the third rider was proclaiming. "They used to bury their dead in this desert by the score, in the days of the Keldan Empire. Now we have to travel a dozen leagues or more just to find a decent meal of nomad offal! I blame these accursed leeches and healers for a lot of it. There just aren't sufficient people dying nowadays!"

"Quit your bellyaching, Fangrot, for Yaggu-Sinash's sake!" snarled the leading rider. "I've never known such a ghoul for looking a corpse in the mouth! Did you not get your gut filled back there?"

"Not the food I'm used to, Mouldsnout - I'll have you know that!" retorted Fangrot. "These nomads are full of string and gristle. Now, what I'd like is a nice plump eunuch, just a halfscore days in the tomb. They taste exquisite."

"I prefer stillborn babes myself," remarked Mouldsnout. "But one can't be too choosy, can one? Not these days. We'll be eating beef before long!"

"Don't be obscene!" ejaculated Scab-tongue, from the rear.

The trail gradually sloped down into lower ground again and soon the macabre quartet came to the bank of a shallow river, winding through the floor of a scrubby valley. They rode their haughty mounts across the water and then dismounted on the far side. For the remainder of that night, they sat around in a vulturine conclave, feasting on grim delicacies from their saddle-bags, while Pashonnio replenished his canteen and watched from the shadows of the bank opposite. As soon as the new day dawned, three of the ghouls rose and, mounting their gryphons, urged the monsters into motion.

"We're off to see whether any more graves have been dug in the soft clay further east, Wartlip," informed the leader, addressing the ghoul who deigned to remain where he was, munching a mouthful of dried offal.

"Bring me back a limb, if you find anything," requested Wartlip, thrusting a fresh morsel into the shadowy confines of his cowl with a heavily-swathed hand.

As the three riders departed, a wild plan took shape in Pashonnio's

mind. Suppose, thought he, that he could slay the solitary ghoul and impersonate it by garbing himself in its robes? None of the others would credit his audacity and, by travelling with them, he would mayhap reach some outpost of civilization, where he could expose the fiends and earn himself passage to Baph-Dhassad.

The idea grew surer as he considered it and, stepping carefully from his cover, he crept down to the water's edge and, drawing his rapier, began to wade across. Soon he was paddling ashore on the opposite bank and, tip-toeing up behind the seated ghoul, he silently drew back his sword and thrust.

His blade shore through the black robes and the body beneath, and he drove it home with such force that it sank to the hilt, protruding from the chest of his victim. Pulling it clean, he stepped nimbly back, smiling his self-satisfaction and waiting for the ghoul to topple over. Unfortunately, however, it took a less predictable course of action.

Breathing stertorously, the skewered scavenger rose to its feet and turned imperiously, a gleam of crimson eyes glaring from the shadows of the concealing cowl.

"Er...m-m-my apologies, my l-lord," stammered Pashonnio. "A fine m-m-morning, th-think you not?"

Singularly unimpressed by these platitudes, Wartlip lunged for the audacious minstrel; but, as he did so, his feet slipped in the wet sand and he fell heavily. Rolling onto his hands and knees, he endeavoured to rise again. Before this intention could be accomplished, however, his dishevelled robes momentarily parted to reveal a portion of hairy, scabrous skin. At the direct contact of sunlight upon this area, Wartlip gave vent to a night-marish scream and his garments collapsed in a limp pile.

Pashonnio stood stunned by this phenomenon, staring suspiciously at the empty robes spread loosely on the sand, then squatted cautiously and took them gingerly between a fastidious thumb and forefinger; lifting them to reveal the fine dusting of ash beneath. The remains of the late Wartlip, he concluded.

Without wasting further time, he hastened to complete the remainder of his plan. He donned the sable robes and pulled the cowl close about his head; then he substituted his own pack for that of the deceased ghoul, disposing of the latter in the river. Before very much longer, the other three returned.

"That was a waste of time," grumbled Fangrot. "We dug up an old woman, with no more than six mouthfuls of meat on her - and that was as tough as cured leather!"

"Aye," growled Scab tongue, commiseratingly. "Why can't the fools bury wenches with some fat on their thighbones?"

"Well," sighed Mouldsnout, "it must suffice. Let us ride."

Pashonnio uneasily mounted the tethered gryphon which stood nearby and its docility surprised him somewhat. He soon came to the conclusion that the beasts were unjustly maligned. As arrogant as camels, they strode over the dunes in perfect file, using their pinions to fan their riders and clicking their great beaks in some bizarre language of their own.

Later in the day, Fangrot cast Pashonnio a quizzical look.

"You're quiet, brother Wartlip," the former remarked. "Stomach paining you again?"

"Aye," growled Pashonnio, in his most guttural tone.

"Too much offal and too little meat off the bone," commented Mouldsnout.

"Nay," argued Fangrot. "I keep telling him - he eats his manflesh whilst it is still too fresh! If he let it fester for longer, he would digest it that much easier. When my bitch served him month-old chitterling of Meggan merchant, green and crawling with dung-flies, he ate five big helpings with no ill affect. Isn't that right, Wartlip?"

Pashonnio grunted in assent.

"You, Fangrot, would serve your guests griddled mummy," remarked Mouldsnout.

"Not on your platter!" exclaimed Fangrot, justifiably appalled at this contemptible assertion. "I keep that for myself!"

Towards evening, the domes and towers of what looked like a large city appeared on the northern horizon; although, even at that great distance, it seemed to exude an aura of neglect and desertion, as if it had outlived its inhabitants and then fallen into ruin. When Pashonnio was close enough to perceive more details, he saw that his initial impression had been a valid one. Great blocks of stone lay scattered where they had fallen from the tumbled walls and all were wreathed with brown weeds and creepers. Huge pillars leaned precariously, surmounted by statues of hideous daemons, grotesque beyond mortal imagination. Palaces, mansions and temples, broken and sinister, stretched into the distance and, in the centre of the metropolis, stood what resembled a apacious arena.

Night had fallen by the time they reached the ancient ruins and the moon shone like a spectral skull above them as their terrible mounts bore them between titanic monoliths and along debris-littered streets towards the core of the city. Narrow fissures clove the weed-grown flagstones and unmentionable odours drifted out of them, as if they opened into all the graves that had ever been dug since the beginning of the world.

Reaching the crumbling arena, Pashonnio's companions dismounted and, to avoid auspicion, he did likewise; although, in truth, he felt the strongest impulse to spur his tawny steed out of the city as fast as its legs would carry it. Arched portals in the outer wall gave entrance to the ruined amphitheatre and the ghouls, with Pashonnio amongst them, now passed under the nearest of these. It was then that the minstrel saw the true nature of the edifice. There was no floor to it. Instead of the ground he had expected to see, there yawned a massive pit; some two hundred cubits or more in diameter, with a spiral staircase winding around its outermost reaches. Down this latter, the ghouls were evidently resolved upon going.

Awful beyond conception was that descent into the dank, foetid depths. The opening above dwindled to a mere pinpoint of inky sky and then faded altogether, while the shaft grew rank with moss and mould. Then, suddenly, the steps ended and Pashonnio and his foul companions stood upon a level floor of stone. Near where the stairway finished, another arched portal broke the surface of the circular wall, its interior as black as pitch.

Following the example of his unsuspecting captors, the minstrel passed through that ominous doorway and found himself in an unlighted tunnel. He was now vastly regretting his absurd policy of imitating a ghoul. Shuffling blindly for what seemed like an eternity, he eventually perceived a faint illumination some considerable distance ahead. As he drew closer, it appeared that the tunnel ended at this point and that life moved in the reaches beyond. He now detected the sinister notes of a flute emanating from the region he progressed towards and was of the opinion that he could teach the musician responsible a thing or two regarding the correct way of playing the instrument in question.

After a time, it became clear that a second portal, identical to the first, terminated this end of the tunnel and that the chamber it let into was filled with dank, swirling vapour. At last, Pashonnio and the ghouls completed their advance along the black corridor and crossed the threshold of that second portal. The vapour cleared somewhat as they entered a large, rectangular vault, illuminated with phosphorescent fungi, and, upon their appearance, a detestable music swelled forth and deafened Pashonnio with its discordance. But gross and hideous though it was, he paid it little heed; so great was his horrified astonishment at beholding the musicians themselves. Sleepy-eyed toads, larger than a man, waddled obscenely on their hind limbs, blowing eerie notes on flutes of hollowed bone; animate skeletons, with champing jaws and glowing orbits, beat frenetically on drums of skin flayed from Yerphi virgins; golden-tressed youths, eyes as-sparkle, lips a stark scarlet, swept harp strings of sinew with hooked talons and sang in sepulchral tones, revealing needle-fine fangs and bi-

furcated tongues; satyrs and goblins plucked mandolins and blew fanfares on brazen horns.

Pashonnio's gaze was drawn from this scene by a dais in the centre of the crypt, upon which stood a woman garbed in a tight-fitting robe of shimmering silk. She was, despite her surroundings and the somewhat evil cast of her features, of a rare beauty. Raven tresses, thick and curling, cascaded over her shoulders and past the firm, ample globes of her breasts. In her lustrous eyes of liquid midnight burned the suppressed desire of a thousand harlots and her ripe, crimson lips contrasted violently with the marble paleness of her complexion. The translucent robe concealed virtually nothing of her statuesque proportions and the minstrel found himself unable to refrain from studying the curving contours so tantalizingly revealed. The three ghouls now sidled towards the dais, halting with bowed heads before the waiting temptress, and Pashonnio followed their example.

"So, you offal-scavenging tomb-spawn!" she greeted them, her voice as crystal-sweet as that of a young nun in a convent choir, yet as sensuous as the verbal enticements of a courtesan of Xin. "You have finally returned! Put aside those robes and retire to your burrows."

One after another, the three creatures beside Pashonnio threw their garments to the floor. They were large-boned, apish beings, with the snouts of hyenas; tusked and uncouth of visage; dusky of skin and filthy with the grime of grave-robbing and muck-raking. Pashonnio alone remained swathed and cowed.

"Why do you not disrobe, subject?" queried the voluptuous female on the dais, sounding like a demure virgin and a debauched whore in the same breath.

At that point, Pashonnio did. He cast aside the impeding robes and, in virtually the same moment, tore his knife from its sheath on his thigh. With one swift bound, he leapt upon the dais, grabbed the woman by her most accessible arm, twisted the aforementioned limb behind her back and pulled her close to him. Then, placing the blade against her bare throat, he addressed her thus:

"One move on the behalf of this congregation to harm me," he declared, "and I shall slit your gullet!"

He hoped it sounded convincing, for, in truth, such exquisitely-shaped gullets were not made for slitting - and the woman, whoever she was, probably knew it. But none seemed to care that he had lain violent hands upon their mistress. The musicians played on obliviously, led by a daemon fiddler. Only the ghouls watched him - and they with frank astonishment.

Fangrot was first to recover from the shock.

"I told him this would happen if he kept eating his manflesh too fresh!" said he, nodding sagely. "He's turned into a mortal! He'll be eating beef next, you see!"

Meanwhile, the woman on the dais twisted her beautiful head and looked up into Pashonnio's face with a sardonic smile curling her lips and making her features as feral as those of a lynx.

"You can only slit my gullet with a blade of the purest silver, rune-engraved and druid-blessed," she purred.

Pashonnio groaned. His knife was cheap Vyrian steel, engraved with naught more than a common trade-mark and blessed by nobody save the merchant who had sold it to him.

"Why this talk of slitting gullets?" whispered the temptress, breathing huskily into his ear and biting the lobe gently. "I am Tyshana, Queen of the Rheldan City of Ghouls; schooled in all the forbidden arts of love. Come and mate with me."

Under more normal circumstances, Pashonnio might well have complied with this request. The environment, however, was not conducive to such activities and, furthermore, he dimly remembered a legend he had heard related by a scabby beggar in Nessar-Shad the previous cycle. According to this erudite individual, Tyshana was a wanton vampire, who, like a spider, sucked her mates dry immediately after they had appeased her. The fact that the lady in question was now making some rather odd and unfeminine drinking noises deep in her throat, whilst she nuzzled Pashonnio's neck, did not entirely



contribute to a refutation of this story.

"Your Majesty," he replied, thinking swiftly, "I am greatly honoured that my unworthy self should prove so desirable to you. I insist that you allow me to remunerate such generosity by entertaining you with a terpsichorean composition of my own. I am, you understand, a minstrel by profession and I would fain not have you think me ungracious."

"Very well," assented Tyshana, with some reluctance. "I suppose you require an instrument?"

"Aye," agreed Pashonnio promptly, pointing to the daemon fiddler. "That fellow's fiddle, if I may."

"Zephapulchom!" cried Tyshana. "Give this youth your fiddle!"

"Behold," growled Mouldsnout, nudging Scabtolongue in the ribs with a filth-encrusted elbow as Zephapulchom handed over his fiddle and its stick. "Brother Wartlip is going to play us a tune!"

"Ha! - A jest, in sooth!" laughed Scabtolongue. "The young fool knows not a fiddlestick from a thighbone!"

Ignoring the ghastly assemblage around him, Pashonnio tucked the fiddle beneath his chin and started to bow a fiery jig. The fiendish musicians exchanged bewildered glances and looked at their own instruments with a mixture of suspicion and speculation. Tentatively, a massive toad, fully eight cubits in height, placed its flute to its wide, flaccid mouth and blew a few notes of accompaniment. Then an animate skeleton seemed to grin even wider than the perpetual grin it wore on its fleshless jaws, tapped out the rhythm with one foot and, with a brisk nod of satisfaction, struck up the beat on its drums. Within seconds, the whole band had taken up Pashonnio's lead.

"Smite me with shinbones!" exclaimed Fangrot. "The lad's not bad, is he? I'm going to fetch my bitch's jawbone castanets!"

"Bring me my ribcage xylophone, whilst you're about it!" cried Mouldsnout

"And my bladder and tibular pipes!" added Scab tongue.

Before these orders could be responded to, however, Pashonnio altered his tune to the macabre 'Waltz Infernal', composed by the great Berimind-rual Bansooivus, and the partying fiends went wild. While some continued to accompany Pashonnio, others took partners and danced around the vault in floundering widdershins. Fangrot found himself caught up by a stringy old harpy and whirled about until his head spun. He recieved a glimpse of his bitch embraced in the arms of a clumsy troll with huge stone feet and was glad that she had brazen toenails.

"May I have the pleasure?" Zephapulchom enquired of Tyshana, stretching out his grappling-hook claws in invitation.

"Certainly," she answered, stepping into position.

Zephapulchom promptly whirled her away.

Pashonnio, meanwhile, stepped off the dais and, still fiddling furiously, edged towards the archway by which he had entered the vault. Soon he was back in the lightless corridor, a procession of devilish musicians floundering along in his wake and continuing to render their own unique variation of the 'Waltz Infernal'. Behind them waltzed the couples; spinning into the narrow corridor and rolling along the walls in an oblivious delirium. Some fell down, to be trampled by those following, and Fangrot took advantage of the darkness to smother his harpy with drooling kisses.

Emerging from the passage, his arm never ceasing its wild sawing, Pashonnio began ascending the spiral stairway of the shaft. Completely hypnotized by the grotesque melody, the inhabitants of the subterranean world pursued him. The waltzers gyrated, cavorted and stumbled on the steps; many of them falling over the edge and tumbling back to the ground below. Fangrot's harpy snatched him into space and the twain continued to dance in mid-air, upheld by the hag's tattered wings. Looking down, the ghoulish saw his bitch a hundred feet or more beneath him, crushed to a pulp under the great troll, which had taken her over the edge with it and was now clambering to its feet in search of a new partner. Fangrot swore uncouthly. That particular bitch had been a good corpse-sniffer.

Up and up wound the awful throng and, eventually, the opening appeared above, growing larger by the minute. The moon was gone and a paleness seemed to have begun to dilute the inky zenith. Seeing this, Pashonnio chuckled to himself. Minutes later, he skipped nimbly up the remaining half dozen steps and, fiddling as he had never fiddled before, led the ensorcelled monstrosities out of the pit and through the streets of the ruined city. Before very long, the thoroughfares were crowded with waltzing toads, skeletons, trolls, satyrs, ghouls, daemons and a host of less describable creatures. Pashonnio jumped up onto the pedestal of a fallen statue and kept them dancing without respite, ever and anon glancing skyward and grinning wickedly. Then, suddenly, the first pale ray of the sun broke through the dawn vapours, bathing the city and its grotesque inhabitants in a mellow light.

A collective scream deafened Pashonnio and almost caused him to fall from the pedestal. Ghouls disintegrated to ash and skeletons fell apart at their joints; harpies ignited and spiraled groundwards like moths caught by candle-flames; toads hopped blindly for the shade of gloomy interiors and daemons writhed and fluttered their pinions as though plagued with itch-mites and ran, howling, back to the arena and the shaft to the underworld. Soon, Pashonnio stood alone in an ancient, ruined highway.

Expelling his breath in a relieved sigh, he stepped down from the pedestal. A mild breeze wafted the sooty remains of Fangrot, Mouldsnout, Scab-tongue and company across the empty desert. Stillness and silence reigned over all.

It was then that Pashonnio saw Tyshana standing in front of him, transformed into lifeless stone. Her arms were still stretched out to accommodate her dancing partner, but of Zephapulchom there was no sign. Drawing his knife, the minstrel vandalously scratched his initial on one ample buttock with the point, before wandering away to find one of the gryphons, which

would, likely enough, get him to the Oasis of Shyn, where he could await the next caravan to Baph-Dhassad.

"A nowhere near bad fiddle, this!" he remarked to himself, turning the instrument this way and that. "Methinks I will have it restrung though. Most likely it has human sinew upon it at present!"

AS DAYLIGHT FADES...

A flame of rapturous blue cobolt erupts
from the half-empty bottle, smoothly poised upon my dressing table.
Outward from the mantle, time swells in ponderous, echoing waves;
hearken! the drumming pulsebeat of my dark and brooding lover!
A cool breeze, sweet with the scent of lilies,
parts the gauzy fabric of the drapes with swirling gust.
Twilight gathers like furtive cobwebs along the slope of the veranda;
each glistening emerald blade of lawn
seems to bow beneath the weight of swift encroaching shadows.
From the autumnal blaze of tremulous ripples
two snowy swans splash skyward, their arcing bodies limned
in golden fire.
The room seems cold. My eyes swim. A dervish whirls within my brain.
The flickering darkness smells of musty wood, rosewater, kerosene.
Chill droplets bead my brow,
dripping,
meandering with tickling hesitance down curves of cheek and throat.
Crinoline scrunches crisply, the mattress sways and creaks.
My heart flutters like a moth in candlelight.
I huddle woundedly into the comforter,
gaze with eager expectation
at the murky image in the looking glass -
the familiar, cherished face now tinged with ashen pallor;
coral lips fading like a withered rose;
the azure orbs, haunted, feverish with longing.
Among the mirrored shades,
a youth, handsome and sombre, slowly rises.
In his hand a charred torch, inverted, dangles.
Swooning upon the coverlet,
I gather to this labouring breast
the calm, stilling embrace of my beloved -

THANATOS.

t. WINTER-DAMON

GARDEN OF USHER

corpse-face this flower
black eyes on white, pansy in
waiting for slug death

STEVE SNEYD

THERE IS A WAY

there is a way in which your smile
bends like the branches of the oak
as it twists and curls beneath the weight
of one more man
whose fate is bound by the hangman's noose

not that this in any way is supposed to suggest
that you would cut beneath the skin
flay alive with promises
twist again the broken limbs
or hang out souls as if like washing

merely that
the image seemed
for a second only
to fit

DAVE REEDER



The Night Bird

Simon G. Gosden

THE DORMOBILE ENGINE droned on and on; Toby had been driving through the night and now he felt tired and not a little dirty. At last a layby loomed ahead in the early dawn greyness and smiling to himself he pulled the battered van off the road. Rubbish erupted from the waste bins at the side of the pull-off and the wheels locked as he hit the ageing brakes a little too hard on the loose gravel surface. He turned the engine off immediately, it over-ran twice and then an unearthly silence filled the little van. Yawning, he gazed at himself in the rear view mirror. An unshaven, unkempt reflection leered up at him through blood shot eyes that were scarcely capable of remaining open a minute longer. He shrugged and groping along the dash managed to pull a cigarette from the crumpled packet, he fumbled for a match in the pockets of his coat and inhaled deeply on the cigarette as the vesta flared into life. That felt a whole lot better, he thought, and he made his way slowly and with some difficulty over the front seats to stretch his wiry frame on one of the long seats that ran down the side of the Dormobile. His eyelids, already heavy with fatigue, slowly closed and Toby fell into a deep sleep.

Memories flooded out from the deep inner recesses of his mind, memories of his long-dead parents, memories, bitter and twisted, of his months in Borstal.

Memories of his first meeting with Ralph, for whom he now worked as a commodity supplier, supplying eggs. Not just any eggs, but eggs from rare

and endangered species for which Ralph's clients were willing to pay very handsomely for; with no questions asked.

Memories of salacious and often pleasantly sadistic nights spent on these seats with bored country girls whose monotonous lives Toby had for a brief period of time managed to considerably enrich. Also memories of those poor lasses who found out to their cost that Toby had a dark side to his otherwise cheerful countenance. Many was the time that Toby left the girls sobbing, bruised and torn, with a large wad of notes in an effort to buy their silence the morning after a night of violent passion.

Memories...

"What the Hell..."

Sleep fled from him rapidly as a slight sound at the edge of his perception dragged him awake. A faint scratching above him testified to the fact that something was on the roof of the van. He held his breath and in the darkness of the confined space he felt rather than saw the trembling of his hands. With his heart pounding in his chest he slowly drew himself up to a sitting position.

The noise persisted and then intensified quite suddenly. A rapid staccato beat was being played out on the roof and it reverberated hollowly in the dark confines of the van. As if to add more misery to this situation the van began, imperceptibly at first, to rock. As the tattoo that was being played on the roof grew in ferocity so did the disconcerting and utterly terrifying pitching. Toby, his hands clasped to his ears, moaned grimly and then fell to the floor in utter panic as loose items dislodged from the racks on either side of the van by the savage movement came crashing down around him. He screamed as he lay prostrate on the floor and as he did a bottle of scotch tumbled from the rack above his head. In falling it caught him solidly behind the ear and smashed into a myriad of pieces. Unconsciousness brought him sudden and unexpected relief from this unearthly torment.

Some hours later Toby struggled awake. In the half light of dawn he surveyed the carnage in the van. Gingerly he fingered his scalp; dried blood and a not inconsiderable bump illustrated clearly the force with which the bottle had hit.

Half crawling and mindful of the shards of glass he reached for the handle of the van and lurched into the crisp dawn air. Frantically he scanned the immediate vicinity anxious to find whoever or whatever had persecuted him so. Nothing was visible anywhere and then his attention was drawn to the roof of the van. Hundreds of thousands of small rounded indentations covered the roof. No bigger than a fingernail and about a quarter of an inch deep, they completely covered every flat piece of exposed metal.

"Hail", his mind grasping at a logical explanation, "bleeding hail, would you bloody believe it." An insubstantial chuckle escaped from his lips which were already smiling. "Bloody hail," he added once more as if trying to convince himself of the truth of the statement.

He rubbed his hands which were trembling ever so slightly and then returned to the van to begin clearing up. "After all," he reasoned, "there's work to do tonight."

The wind that whipped over the North Sea came straight from the Arctic Circle and the clouds it drove before it scudded like mad things across the moon as its reflected light caught them like moths before a candle flame. The lights of the pub ahead shone like a welcoming beacon in the gloom. Toby spun the wheel and the Dormobile pulled into the empty car park just as the first snow flakes were driven against the windscreen. He shivered and pulling his coat lapels tight around his neck he raced for the pub door.

The aroma of beer and cigar smoke combined with the pervading warmth of the room immediately put him at his ease. The acrid tang of wood smoke mingled with the delicious smell of cooked food; Toby grinned, stamped his feet on the mat and began to remove his outer coat. The girl caught his eye as he turned; she had glanced up at the stranger and as their eyes

met Toby nodded in her direction and gave her one of his smiles. She responded, much to Toby's amazement, with warmth, and the twinkle in her eye betrayed the fact that she was as much in need of company as Toby was.

He moved to the bar, an ornate affair with a host of bottles, each one a different colour reflecting the log fire that roared in the grate. He realised with astonishment that the girl had followed his every move as he walked across the room. Behind the inverted bottles the mirror offered him a view of her that she could not have known about.

Long dark hair and twinkling green eyes, she sat alone by the raging fire, a single drink beside her. Taking a deep breath, he took the plunge and strolled over to her. He smiled as charmingly as he knew how.

"Is anyone sitting here?" he ventured.

"No, by all means sit down," she replied in a deep mellow timbre that sent delicious shudders through Toby. Her eyes twinkled in the firelight and the instant response to his question made it fairly obvious that she was only too ready to talk to anyone on that wild wintry night.

Inside the van, a frying pan sizzled on a small single burner camping stove, a trio of Walls sausages hissed and spat as Toby busied himself preparing a meal. Toby picked up an egg and cracked it into the pan, the hot fat erupted into violent activity and then subsided. Toby, whistling merrily by now at the thought of hot food, put the lid down carefully on the pan and sipping from the steaming mug of tea close at hand he sat back on the foam cushion and sighed contentedly.

All thoughts of that morning's bizarre events had been dismissed as the prospect of hot food and the evening's expedition had captured his undivided attention. He leaned over and turned the radio on and as the gentle melodies washed through the van he dished up the sausage and eggs, buttered some slices of bread and tucked in.

Later, the plate pushed away, he belched contentedly. At times like this he felt marvellous; well fed, warm and, above all else, his own master. The evening was drawing in now and in the dusky light Toby reached for his cigarettes, he pulled one from the flip top pack and, with exaggerated grace, struck a match to light it.

"Toby," the whispered voice struck him with the force of a thunderbolt and the lit match and the hand that held it stood immobile, inches from the cigarette it had been on its way to light.

"Toby," again barely audible the voice echoed in the van. The effect on Toby was shattering; the hand that held the match started to shake, not to tremble, but actually to shake. The orange glow this threw lit the interior of the van in a strange unearthly way. Finally the match burnt down but Toby hardly noticed the pain of the burn as it spluttered against his thumb and forefinger. His head spun frantically from side to side desperately trying to locate the origin of that eerie ethereal voice.

"Why, Toby?" the voice rasped. "Why?" More than a whisper now it filled Toby with an irrational fear that he had certainly never experienced before.

"Why, why?" the voice screamed at him from all sides. Both hands shook violently as Toby tried to shut out the unearthly howling. His heart raced uncontrollably as the terror welled within, beads of sweat broke out on his brow and his eyes appeared to roll in their sockets as he still tried to track down the source of the sound.

Louder and louder the voice kept on, ever louder until at a point where Toby felt that his head would burst asunder with the volume, the radio at the end of the table exploded into flame.

The silence was deafening, Toby sat stunned, shaking and weeping with relief that the torture was finally over. The cigarette still in his mouth, unlit. Stumbling, his legs almost impossible to control, he grabbed the radio and on opening the rear doors, flung it as far as he could into the layby.

It flew in an impressive arc through the still air, clearly visible in the dusk and on impact smashed to pieces. Flaming fragments scattered over the gravel to be quickly extinguished by the drizzle that was falling.

Breathing heavily, his shaking hands found a bottle of Scotch. Not bothering with the top he simply smashed the neck on the table and poured a stiff measure into the empty tea cup. Gingerly he raised the cup to his lips and with both hands clasped firmly around it to avoid accidental spillage he downed the lot.

The evening drew on apace and as it grew steadily colder outside the temperature inside and the alcohol that flowed freely at their little table soon generated an intimate warmth between the two strangers.

The conversation ebbed and flowed as it does amongst two people who are happy simply in each other's company. He found out her name, Cora, that she was the daughter of a Traveller's family and that she lived, at present, on a site not far from the pub. The rest of the Travellers had been banned from this hostelry but the Landlord didn't know that she was a gypsy. She was lovely, an only child, and had never met any other single men apart from the other Travellers. In return he told her about his life, though not all of it, and tall tales that only a man can tell a woman infatuated with his company.

At closing time Toby, naturally, offered her a lift. "No," she declined, shaking her head. Toby marvelled at the way her hair gleamed and shimmered by the firelight. "Thanks all the same but I walk, it's not far, honestly."

"Rubbish," he riposted in mock anger, "it's an awful night and anyway you haven't seen the van yet." It is doubtful whether she noticed the unfamiliar lilt to his voice at that point as she acquiesced to his demands and arm in arm they left the pub. Their breaths coalesced into ghostly wraiths, as they made their way across the empty car park.

Toby by now was fully toggled up for the evening's work, a tough black oiled jacket that had seen better days, mole skin trousers, sturdy boots and a canvas shoulder bag lined with cotton wool. A secure resting place for his valuable booty. He pulled on a pair of fingerless woolen gloves, and with a deep breath emerged from the comfort and warmth of the van into the cold night.

The night air was electrifying, it cleared his head, which was a little muzzy after the events of the early evening, and feeling a lot better he set off jauntily towards his goal. He had pre-planned the route long ago and marked it with gashes cut with a machete on the sides of prominent trees. The moon was waning and cast little in the way of light, but once his eyes became accustomed to the gloom he was able to make steady progress as the going got more and more difficult.

In the half-light, twigs lashed at his face and clothes and branches threatened more damage. These he avoided painstakingly but fallen boughs hidden on the forest floor more than once sent him crashing heavily to the ground. Once as he lay prostrate and panting he thought he heard his name called far, far away but with the wind that was building steadily he dismissed it as a trick of nature.

Pulling the lapels of his coat firmly around his neck he manfully carried on. At last he reached his target and crashed from the forest into a clearing some fifty yards across within which stood his goal. A mighty aspen, lofty and isolated, reared 90 feet into the inky black sky. To left and right of where he stood a great circle of conifers ringed the solitary tree, for all the world like dark, silent sentinels.

The van pulled smartly out of the car park and sped off up the road. Smiling and laughing Cora gave directions to Toby which he followed with good humour, as the directions she gave were typical of a non-driver's bungled attempt at help. "It's just up here," she giggled, "turn left next, no not left, right."

She subsided into uncontrollable spasms of laughter. As they drew near the site she sat up and prepared to leave, already formulating her goodbye to Toby. She brushed her hair and as they reached the entrance she was about to thank him when he accelerated smartly.

Her mouth dropped open in a pose that might have been comic in any other situation and she turned to protest vehemently. His face, lit by the green glow from the dashboard, confirmed her worst fears and a horrified shriek cut the air.

With one hand on the wheel, he hit her backhanded and very hard, the screaming stopped as suddenly as it began. He pulled off the road and drove into a coppice well away from prying eyes.

The night passed slowly for the girl, slowly and very painfully. Toby had had many years of practice at creating pain and he enjoyed it immensely. He hadn't meant to kill her, at least that was what he told himself afterwards, but at the time he had loved it. He enjoyed seeing the pain on her face and the terror in her eyes as the last seconds of her life ebbed away.

Towards daybreak a Dormobile van pulled up sharply at the site entrance. It stood with the engine running and then suddenly the back doors swung open, a bundle fell heavily from the back propelled by a boot belonging to an unseen person. The van sped off, tyres squealing.

He moved across the clearing and looked up with experienced eyes at the tree. He grinned at the arrangement of the branches.

"Like a bloody ladder," he hissed and rubbed his hands together at the anticipation of the cash these particular eggs would fetch.

Scrambling upwards he gained the lower branches with ease and then concentrated carefully on the remainder of the climb.

It was hard work; the sweat broke out on his brow almost immediately and his breath rasped in his throat at the unaccustomed exertion as he fought against the tree and the elements. One thing in his favour was that he knew where the nest was. He had viewed the site over a year ago and the nest lay snuggled between two boughs not forty feet from where he now was.

He paused as a familiar sound caught his attention. The sound of wings beating against the night air. "Good," he thought "the mother's pissed off, at least that stops all that pathetic squealing and squawking."

Onwards and upwards he went. Ever nearer to that elusive nest. Suddenly through the gloom he spotted it and doubled his exertions. The greed vitalising his aching limbs.

He paused a couple of feet below the nest and from his lofty eerie sixty feet above the ground he scanned the immediate vicinity. He saw nothing untoward, apart from the encircling ring of conifers, black against the starlit sky.

He stretched upwards, gingerly reaching into the nest. His shoulder pouch already open, waiting for its valuable booty.

"Shit!" the expletive was screamed vehemently into the wind, "some bastard bit me!"

He brought his hand closer to examine it, his index and forefinger were bleeding profusely, already soaking the woollen gloves he wore. Grimly holding onto the trunk with one arm he ripped a grubby hanky from his pocket and wrapped it carelessly around his injured finger.

"What gives?" he thought, "what the bloody hell is there in there that bites?"

Stretching upwards he endeavoured to look into the nest, in vain he strained. "Shit!" he cursed again, equally violently.

His searching feet found another foothold and putting all his weight on one foot he cautiously pulled himself up.

Two little green eggs nestled comfortably in a soft bed of down and twigs. Relief flooded over him and he gently reached out to fondle his treasures. They were warm to the touch, a sure sign that the nest had just been vacated. He halted, his hand hovering aimlessly above the eggs as the noise of wings again grabbed his attention. Not the whisper of a single pair of wings but the throbbing crescendo of hundreds of thousands of pairs as they beat upon the now still air.

The trees that ringed the clearing appeared to swell and then a vast cloud burst up from the branches as countless numbers of birds rose majest-

ically in the air and then slowly began to circle the little clearing. The air of menace that they created became tangible and not for the first time that day Toby felt the cold sweat of fear break out on his brow. Breathing heavily he turned back to his prize.

Before his eyes something incredible began to happen. His vision blurred slightly and the two speckled green eggs shimmered, sparkled and perceptibly began to change. Toby looked on with horror unable to tear his eyes away from the astonishing transformation that was taking place before him.

Two green eyes gazed accusingly at him from the nest and even as he opened his mouth to scream a blood-stained mouth opened from the depths of the nest and spat accusingly at him. "Why?" it asked. "Why?"

This proved too much for Toby to bear and screaming he flung himself back from this terrifying apparition. In the same instant he realised his mistake and made a despairing grab at the branch. It snapped under the added strain and Toby, the nest and the branch hurtled down from the tree.

The fall seemed endless to Toby and he lost count of the branches that he hit on the way down. He felt bones crack and splinter as he landed with an earth shattering thud on the ground below.

Searing pain threatened him with unconsciousness as blackness flooded in from the periphery of his vision and attempted to engulf him. He managed to remain conscious and with difficulty surveyed his injuries. A jagged finger of bone protruded vilely from a bloody rent in his moleskins. Gasping for breath, as the wind had been knocked from his body, he managed to struggle to a sitting position and holding his head he began to sob, first with relief, but presently with mindless terror as he spotted, not a yard from where he sat, a raven-haired, green-eyed female head.

It stared at him and Toby, whose whole body was shaking with uncontrollable spasms of fear, stared back, transfixed with undefinable terror.

"Why?" it screamed. "Why?"

The spell broken, Toby scrambled away dragging his shattered leg behind him. No other thought was left to him but to flee the tormented head. As he struggled across the clearing he found himself muttering wildly.

"Cora, I'm sorry," the words passed his lips in an endless babble, as the insanity of the situation threatened to destroy the last vestiges of his own humanity.

When he was no more than halfway across he happened to glance up at the sky. What he saw almost carried him over the precipice and into insanity. Perhaps it would have been better for Toby if it had.

A monstrous swirling vortex of dark bodies rose up from the clearing hundreds of feet into the night sky. In the same instance that he looked up a thousand raucous bird cries rent the air with open savagery and slowly but surely the great spinning mass began to descend.

Sobbing and panting with fear Toby tried to stand and run; his leg gave way immediately and fresh gouts of warm blood ran from the open wound below his knee.

He fell heavily as the first of the razor-sharp beaks tore into his cheeks. Immediately he was surrounded by a myriad darting spears each imbued with a savage, primeval desire to damage him as much as possible. He screamed as the visceral fluid from his eyeballs ran down from his face in a sticky stream, he screamed as his lower lip was wrenched away from his face, and then he screamed until unconsciousness rescued him from the awful agony of those last tortured minutes.

At the foot of the aspen a female head watched and smiled at this dreadful carnage, and as it drew to its inevitable conclusion the head slowly metamorphosed back into a nest and beside the nest two broken eggs lay, the sticky fluid already soaking into the earth.

Traveller's Fare

David G. Rowlands

("Traveller's Fare" is the Trading Name of the catering branch of British Rail.)

THE LOCOMOTIVE OF our train had failed. The station Announcer, regretting the inconvenience to us and that we had over an hour to wait, was nonetheless warm and snug in her eyrie. We, on the other hand, stepped from the carriage of our crippled train into the teeth of a biting East wind that whipped a stinging sleet into our faces.

Father O'Connor led the way to the welcoming glow of the station buffet, and my spectacles misted over swiftly as we entered the humid atmosphere. Soon we were ensconced in a corner, with steaming cup of tea and stale chelsea bun apiece. He looked round humourously at the synthetic decor, redolent of the new image of railway catering.

"I never enter a refreshment room," he said between munches at his bun, "without recalling a very odd experience that befell me many years ago in North Wales.

"I had been giving a Retreat at Pantasaph Monastery and then had a week free. I visited Holywell of course, where that curious and self-tormented writer Rolfe-Corvo had once caused rather a lot of trouble; deputised for a couple of local clergy and then took up with a Brother who had to travel to Anglesea by pony trap. Once there I headed North-East and got a local boatman to take me across to spend a few hours on Priestholme (nowadays called Puffin Island I believe.) There I explored the ruined chapel and tower of St. Seriol's and pondered the legend of the mice who were wont to appear among the hermits and devour their scanty rations whenever discord threatened them. Returning to the main island I poked among the ruins of Penmon - conscious of its associations with Le Fanu's "Tenants of Malory", being particularly struck with the Celtic cross in the South transept and the early square font. Nor did I omit to visit the holy well nearby. I lodged overnight with a landlady in Llanguel, though unlike Mr Dingwell's landlady in "Malory" she had no niece for me to frighten with macabre talk of "stenching boxes and worms, and scarlet fever plague" - even had I felt so inclined!

"However, I did mention my intention of walking Snowdonia before returning to Pantasaph. She advised me to get down to Caernarvon by rail, going on to Dinas Junction. There, she said, I could take the "Toy Train" for Beddgelert and alight at Snowdon, having plenty of time to walk or climb before the one train of the day returned from Beddgelert.

"It transpired that there was a reason for her suggesting this route, rather than the conventional one to Llanberis. Her daughter was in charge of the Tea Rooms at Dinas Junction and there were, it seemed, some items that the good dame wanted conveyed to her. Her daughter was not a good letter-writer and she (the mother) was concerned about her spiritual welfare in the religious desert of Dinas. Since I calculated that her daughter must be at least 40 years of age, I found this concern mildly amusing, but nonetheless accepted the commission.

"Accordingly I found myself about mid-day on the morrow, alighting at Dinas Junction and crossing the platform to the little narrow-gauge Welsh Highland Railway. The landlady's rather polished phrase "Tea Rooms at Dinas" turned out to be in fact a wooden refreshment hut, painted cream and green. The daughter was the only occupant, apart from a sizzling tea-urn and she proved to be a dour lady, tall and angular and with an occasional sniff. She accepted the various packages with none of her mother's loquacity, but gave me a cup of tea "on the house", advising me to make the most of it. There were, it seemed, no facilities at any of the other stations to Snowdon, only a "Buffet Car" in the train (incredible!) but which only

served aerated lemonade and biscuits. She became confidential, leaning over the counter,, "There used to be a refreshment room at Snowdon but the company closed it after..." the rest of the sentence was lost as a chunky little green tank engine clanked noisily past the window, propelling a rake of multi-coloured coaches. Before I could get her to repeat her statement, the door of the hut opened and the Guard came in with a rack of bus tickets.

"Are you travelling on the train, Sir?" he inquired in the local inflection, and ushered me outside and into the "toy train". I noted that there were only two other passengers and wondered how the service could exist on such minimal support. I also noted the "Buffet Car", but there were no signs even of lemonade vending, and I thought gratefully of the landlady's sandwiches.

"With a snatch of couplings we pulled away from Dinas, under a stone bridge and crept through encroaching grass and weeds into some rather scrubby pasture land dotted with cattle.

"Gradually the mountains closed in and we stopped at a little stone built station (obviously a standard type of line) to put down one passenger and pick up another; thus maintaining the status quo.

"However, at another halt where we seemed to be skirting the very foot of Tryfan, we lost both other passengers, and to my chagrin the spectacular view began to disappear as a misty drizzle of rain began to move in. Rain began to spatter and course down the window, to give way to a thick greasy mist. It boded ill for my walk Northwards to Snowdon. Quellyn station loomed momentarily out of the mist as we drifted past, then we clattered over a bridge with cattle grid, above a ravine into which the mist was pouring like a river in flood. The little train writhed round several sharp curves before steam was shut off and we coasted to a halt at Snowdon station. I stepped out into a thick, cold mist and the guard came bustling up from the rear of the train.

"He was a little concerned for me it seemed; for the train had to terminate here at Snowdon instead of going on through the pass to Beddgelert, while the locomotive returned to Tryfan and up a branch-line to collect some freight wagons. It would return for this train now parked at Snowdon, but not until late afternoon. What was I going to do? Clearly I could not walk to Snowdon as had been my intent - the chances of straying into a bog, or of getting lost in the mountain fog were great, and the nearest hamlet - Black Ford - was some way off and equally uncertain terrain. He could only suggest that I wait on the train...for all the station buildings were derelict and shut up.

"You can, perhaps, imagine my chagrin! To be stuck in this desolate, mist-girt place with no chance of leaving for several hours, was not a cheerful prospect. I might find my way to the road, but it was still nine miles to civilisation - or what passed for it in Snowdonia - even if I could keep to the road; and the chances of meeting a motorist were as likely as meeting a dragon.

"However, on the bright side, the Guard produced a rug for me and I had my sandwiches. I could say my Office and perhaps get a nap until the locomotive returned...or until the fog lifted perhaps, if I was lucky. It behoved me to be philosophical.

"I cannot tell you how desolate I felt as the tank engine with crew and Guard aboard puffed away, leaving me alone in the deserted train, at this gloomy and derelict station miles from anywhere. There was no sign of the mist lifting and it swirled and condensed greasily against the window. Once I thought there was a breeze getting up - and my hopes of it clearing rose momentarily - for there was a door opening in one of the deserted buildings. But when I lowered the window and put out my head, there was no vestige of wind, only that incessant thud, thud, thud. It began to get on my nerves and I drew up the window again.

"I resolutely ate my sandwiches and said my daily Office, but the light was too poor to allow of reading my Breviary, or the pocket edition of

Thomas Moore I had brought along. Instead I pulled the rug around me and tried to settle down to sleep away the time remaining.

"Sleep would not come, however...and I was started awake by a scrunching on the granite-chip ballast outside...but it was only a mountain sheep I think. Although I saw nothing, I distinctly heard a bleating noise coming through the mist. And in the buildings, that door continued to bang away...thud, thud, thud.

"I decided to investigate, and walked across the tracks to the dark, deserted buildings. They were of the same stone and brick I had recognised elsewhere on the line, but there was an extra wooden hut from where the banging door clearly originated. I could just make out the word "Refreshments" in large, faded letters on the roof, despite the mist that swirled around and condensed on my clothing.

"The hut had two windows facing the tracks, both boarded up and the door was clearly padlocked. What I had assumed to be a banging door, resolved into a banging on the door, from within...and what I had thought of as a sheep bleating was clearly a cracked voice, calling from within! Who on earth could be trapped in there?

"Somewhat apprehensively I charged the padlocked door with my shoulder several times; then pitched headlong inwards as its rotten timbers gave way suddenly, and I fetched up with a bang on my head at a wooden counter.

"I sat there, partly dazed for a moment and sneezing in the dust I had raised in my precipitate entrance. There was nothing to account for the banging or the bleating which had stopped. The only light came in through the open doorway I had made, and I could see the vaporous mist drifting in from outside. The whole place smelled of damp and mustiness.

"I hauled myself up, leaning on the counter. Adjusting to the dim light I could make out a ruined and tarnished tea-urn that reflected faint light, despite its lack of lustre. A greasy coating of dust was everywhere, feeling more like a deliquescent fungus. I could discern a couple of cafe tables and some chairs. In one corner a sink was full of cobwebs and stacked crockery. Above it a wall pipe and dark stain on the ceiling indicated where a water tank had leaked away its supply over many years.

"I bent and picked up a fallen chair and placed it at the table, and as I slid it into place a hand appeared on the table beside me.

"I can say "hand" advisedly now, but did not immediately recognise the object...which gave me an immense shock for it looked like nothing more than a boiled lobster - bright red and puffy: A loathsomely bloated hand covered in large blisters or pustules from which oozed a fluid, clearly seen against the fiery red of the skin.

"Without thinking, I jumped back and turned in horror, to find myself only inches from face-to-face confrontation with the thing. And as I did so my stomach tried to escape through my mouth.

"I have seen some terrible sights in my time but nothing, I think, that has shocked me quite so much. It's coverings were black and scarcely observable in the dim interior, but the flesh was clearly visible and almost glowing or shimmering in a sort of heat...swollen, blistered and puffy, it must have once been human, yet I could discern no features in that inflamed countenance. A bleating cry came from where a mouth was pinched between suppurating, blown out cheeks; what eyes there may have been were hidden by weeping blisters. My heart gave three or four tremendous beats and I braced myself to speak to the dreadful apparition but I was not prepared for the sudden smell that overwhelmed me - not of burned flesh as I had, perhaps, expected, but a strange, sickly-sweet breath like...well, like an ants nest over which boiling water has been poured. It finished me and I pitched forward helplessly; through the motionless figure and on to the dust-strewn floor.

"When my senses returned, I was lying back-propped up by the Guard while

the driver and his mate bent anxiously over me, holding a billycan of hot, sweet tea to my lips. The Guard shook his head. 'You shouldn't have left the carriage, Sir.'

"They helped me up, for the fog was thickening, and I dusted down my crumpled, damp-attained clothes...that awful smell lingering in my nostrils.

" 'We shall have to get away,' said the driver to the Guard...but they paused at my restraining hand.

" 'Who is it?' I asked, and they listened fearfully to my account.

"I will summarise what they could tell me as briefly as possible. When the railway had gone bankrupt, a Receiver was appointed by the County Court - an ex-Military man with wide experience of running impoverished Light Railways. His regime was extremely unpopular with the staff, who did not respond favourably to his well-meant attempts to improve the concern as a tourist attraction. In particular the old lady station-mistress at Snowdon had orders to spruce up the place, sweep the platforms daily (there weren't any platforms!) and attend to the tea room, which was newly installed, for the tourist season.

"Right from the start there were problems. The old lady spoke mostly Welsh, had troubles with customers and with giving change, and she was terrified of the tea-urn.

"Exasperated by her failure to use the urn, there was a "military" style inspection without warning one day. Thereafter a code of practice was laid down, which involved scalding out the urn at the beginning of each week.

"The very first time she attempted this, standing on a chair to reach the top of the urn and fill it with jugs of boiling water, she slipped - clutched the body of the urn and fell, pulling the entire contraption almost full of near-boiling water on top of her. She was horribly scalded and died of shock before medical aid could reach the isolated station.

"Thereafter the tea room was closed and one of the carriages was fitted



out as a Buffet Car instead. It was provisioned from the Refreshment Rooms at Dinas.

"I felt there ought to be something I could do, but could not be sure whether the apparition of the poor old lady (in Welsh National Costume as Station Mistresses wore) was simply an impression retained by the place itself from the anguish of her intense pain and scalding, or whether she was in a more tangible form, needing assistance. From the knocking and crying I was disposed to think the latter, and it behoved me to do something about it. Of course I could return on the morrow with the Sacraments - though I was due back at Pantassaph. The lady was probably "Chapel" and might resent a "Roman" like myself, but fortunately the Lord's Supper is one thing we do have in common among the Christian sects! It would be very inconvenient to return...could I perhaps temporise? I had no wine and only bread from a sandwich. This I kneaded into a couple of pills. With the Guard's help I ransacked the Buffet Car and found a bottle of aerated Cherryade and a tumbler. These I put on to a tin tray and resolutely crossed to the wood-hut.

"There was no sound, and no sign of any apparition, though I sensed a presence near me and that smell was still present in my nose. I concentrated my thoughts on a sincere consecration of the elements and heard again that tremulous bleating cry. I took a portion of bread and a mouthful of Cherryade myself and proffered the other, pronouncing the absolution. But as I recited the Blessing, I felt that I had judged wrong. Of course, of course! The old lady spoke little English - I had to say the Benediction in Welsh!

"I went back hastily to the Guard. 'Tell me the Welsh words for the Blessing.' For although I am easy with Gaelic, and the basic roots of Celtic languages are, I suppose, the same...I had only a few slangy expressions in my Welsh vocabulary.

"He rehearsed me quickly, until I had the inflection more or less right...though clearly he had to struggle with his ingrained distrust of my popishness.

"I returned to the hut with my tray and spoke the Blessing in Welsh, confident now of success; but no confirmation was given me, and the occasional bleating cry became more insistent. I was nonplussed.

"The Guard came to the doorway. 'Come away Sir, now. We must get back to Dinas.'

"He must have noted how crestfallen I looked, for he clapped me on the shoulder. 'Never mind Sir, you've tried...'

" 'And failed,' I added.

" 'Well, as the Colonel would say, Sir, "A Man can only do so much".'

"Light dawned on me and I grabbed his arm convulsively. 'Who?'

" 'Why, the Receiver, Sir. Colonel Greever.'

" 'Quick man,' I said urgently, 'What would he say, relieving someone of their duty?'

"I strode confidently back to the hut, striving to inject a jorum of military stiffness into my monkish round-shoulders, cleared my throat and adopted as near an approach to a British "Haw-Haw" accent as I could.

" 'Ah-hum. You may go off-duty now, my good woman. Parade's over, what?'

"Corny and caricatured it may have sounded, but it seemed to do the trick, for the wailing cry which had started up again, faded away and my nose suddenly became aware of the stale mustiness of the old deserted cafe. I felt right in myself, and remembered humbly that the Guard's remark could not have been purely by chance.

"Our train made good time back to Dinas, where - ironically - the sun had shone all day, and was now going down. We had long missed the connection to Caernarvon - luckily there were no other passengers, and I had to be grateful for a lift in a bumpy pony trap.

[Traveller's Fare continued on p.35]



The Dead Field

David Sutton

TIM TURNED LEFT onto Dark Lane and scampered off, his rucksack jogging at his back. "Come on, slowcoaches!" he bellowed.

An August sun full of heat burned down from its midday high as Brian and Tony trudged around the bend, their rucksacks weighing heavy. The countryside was still, heavy with torrid warmth. Sparrows sang gaily from the greenery while martins swooped endlessly above in a sky of dazzling, scorched blue. Dark Lane beckoned, its narrow, ruinous road cloistered with straggling bushes and oaks. Slabs of shade blotted out portions of the road as it dropped dizzily down hill at a sharp angle.

Brian sighed, wiping a sheen of sweat from his brow. He was the fattest of the three boys and felt the heat most under his mop of unruly black hair. He squinted down the lane at Tim, who was now well ahead, and sighed again. Brian peered through round, owl-eye spectacles, giving his brown eyes a languid, liquid appearance.

"I'll have to stop and take my pullover off," Brian said. It had been cool that morning and his mother had made him put it on. The other two were in shirt sleeves, their woollens packed away, but even Tony was roasted by the heat. "What a day to go camping," Brian complained, struggling to remove his pullover, the buttons of his shirt popping open around his plump belly. He sighed again, this time with relief.

"Come on, fatso!" Tony insisted, "or Tim'll beat us to the camp site." Tony gave an exasperated gasp and shook his head, walking on. He gratefully stepped into the shade, out of a blazing sun that had already burned his

face red. Tony was a good four inches taller than Brian, rather lanky, with bright ginger hair cut short. His face, usually freckled, now felt distinctly uncomfortable with the sunburn.

The morning had been pleasant enough, with the three boys setting off on an exciting camping expedition into the country surrounding the new housing estate. They had been eager, exhilarated and friendly. Now tempers had begun to fray as the noon sun piled heat mercilessly down, but they staggered on. The lanes, with their continuous rows of hedges and trees, occasional gates and farmhouses, had become endless, more an object of growing annoyance than of interest.

Dark Lane was an old Roman road, narrow, deeply rutted, it hardly appeared to have been kept in order since ancient times; but at least it offered shade as it sloped recklessly down, the trees above arching over, almost making a tunnel.

Tony reached the bottom of the road as it turned slightly, inevitably heading upwards again, out into the sun. Brian puffed along and stopped, leaning against a dilapidated fence overlooking a fast-moving stream which went on under the road and off between bordering rows of trees across the opposite field. Tony was looking round: "Where's Tim gone?"

Brian for his part merely gasped in air, feeling the cool wafting breeze coming from the stream below. As he looked down, the water rippling over pebbles, sluicing into miniature gulleys and rushing on under the bridge of old grey stone, he noticed a movement in the darkness. Suddenly Tim came splashing out of the archway, sending up great gushes of water. He laughed up at the frightened face of Brian, as it turned into one of annoyance. Tim climbed the soft, muddy bank of the stream, his shoes sodden. "Scared you, didn't I," he laughed. "Come on, only a short trek over this field and we're there." Tim crossed the road and climbed through the hedgerow, out into the expanse of fields which rose up, hiding what lay beyond the crest. Cow pats, baked hard, crunched under their searching feet. Tim, as usual, led the way. His strides were long, his body erect in the heat, no sweat beading his forehead. Tim's stamina was admired, an attribute to go along with his boyish, but handsome face, his well proportioned body and easy manner.

The brow of the hillock reached, the three boys stood gazing down on the scene spread before them: Pastures cut neatly into squares and rectangles by rows of hedges and trees, a tiny farmhouse and buildings in the distance and, nearer to hand, settled immovably in the centre of a low-lying field, the dell where they were to camp. The wooded hollow looked inviting, a shaded spot on the landscape, roughly circular in shape, composed of numerous trees and undergrowth and centred with a pool. The pond itself would be stagnant, but the trees would offer shelter to pitch the tents. From there they could enjoy three or four days wandering the country-side, collecting insects and butterflies and searching after small animals.

Tim put a pair of binoculars to his eyes. "There it is," he said in a mock meaningful voice, "Base-camp one!"

They all shouted "hooray" then and ran, breakneck, down the grassy slope, stumbling, falling, rolling and laughing.

Finally, breathless, they reached the dell. A few cows raised their heads at the sight of the boys tumbling along, but soon went back to their grazing as though it was a commonplace enough sight to see youngsters gamboling through the fields.

Their rucksacks were dashed to the ground gratefully, even Tim welcome of the weight off his back. He'd set a rigorous pace all morning, with only one short break for a sandwich and guzzle of cola. Brian sat disconsolately on his rucksack. "Tim, what if the farmer comes along. Won't he -"

"Nav. I've been here before. He won't mind. Besides, that's where we get our fresh water from."

"What!" Tony exclaimed. "The farmhouse is miles away."

"No it isn't, silly," Tim answered him, "and we won't have to go very often once we've filled this." He tapped with his foot the two-gallon plastic water container that Tony had carried strung to his belt.

Evening drew on as Brian sat cooking over the double ring of a calor gas

camping stove. One billycan bubbled with water Tim had earlier brought from the farm, while various utensils lay scattered on the grass: A battered teapot, spoons, plastic plates, tins. The two tents were sturdily rigged under the overhang of the trees. Sleeping bags were still rolled up outside, as were the provisions of beans, other various tinned goods, packets of soup, tea and powdered milk. The campsite was littered. Brian was the cook and he was struggling with a can opener while Tim and Tony lay back resting. They had both put up the tents and Tim had gone to fetch the water while Tony had gone off on his own to return an hour later.

"Where d'you go to?" Brian asked as he dished up baked beans into the others' plates. "I mean, you could've stayed and tidied up a bit."

Tony crossed his legs, resting the plate on one knee. "Just scouting round, what's it to you anyway?"

"Hey," Tim interrupted, "no arguing. We've all got our jobs. Tony, you were supposed to put the stuff inside the tents, but I s'pose we'll have to let you off now."

Tony's blue eyes burned in his reddened face for a moment, then he said, "Sorry, pals. But I did find something interesting."

"Oh yeah. What?" Tim asked.

"I'll show you in the morning. It'll be part of our first expedition. And take it from me, it's...it's strange."

"Show us tonight!" Tim replied, giggling, and giving a sideways glance at Brian eating his meal.

Brian swallowed. "I'm not going anywhere in the dark. I'd rather stay here on my own. Besides," he whined, "didn't we all agree not to go out at night. Anyway, my mom told me not to."

"Cissy," Tony hissed as he slurped tea from an enamel mug.

Dinner went on in silence, each boy wrapped in his own thoughts. The sun was setting and a cool breeze was bending the grass, now darkening with oncoming night. There was a tense silence between them, etched, outlined by the larger silence at the dell. The birds had stopped singing and the still water under the trees, like a leaden expanse, reflected dimly the last gleams of the sun. The breeze had not penetrated that arboreal place, at the edge of which stood the incongruous orange coloured tents.

The quietness continued, Brian and Tim thinking about Tony's secret and Tony himself conscious of this and of the greater, eerie pondering of the enshadowed dell. It was as if the countryside was alive with a silent, implacable sentience. He had discovered the strange place he intended to show the others, yet he felt that somehow the gnarly oaks and silvered beeches had caught his glimmering thoughts and they too knew he had found something...something that was not quite right in the countryside.

Later a full moon bathed the fields in a silvery glow, lighting the boys' camp as they finalised the sleeping arrangements. One tent was to hold all the provisions, the stove, binoculars, notebooks, specimen jars, while the three of them would sleep in the other.

In the morning, while Brian cooked a breakfast of eggs that Tim had bought at the farm, Tony was tying lengths of string to the rims of open-ended jam jars. Tying the loose ends to convenient trees and tossing the jars some feet out into the pond, they hit with a deadened splosh sound, bubbling to sink and stirring up black sediment. The day was starting warm with a hazy sun and a few water-boatmen skimmed with graceful ease over the surface of the pond while gnats in a cloud skittered in a patch of sunlight.

Tony returned to the tents. "We should have quite a catch in a day or two," he said, "Caddis fly larva, water-beetles, the works."

Tim nodded appreciatively as he strapped a short knife to his belt and hung his binoculars round his neck. "Well, are you going to show us this mysterious place you were on about yesterday?"

"Try and stop me! Tony beamed. "You ready, Brian?"

They set off at a steady pace, taking a wide-eyed interest in the wild-life, the insects and birds, of the country. They travelled back to Dark Lane and across, finally along the course of the stream which cut into the hills, the banks steep-sided, blotting out the morning sun. The stream was

alive with insects and birds of various kinds, while its cool rippling sound accompanied the general murmur and humming of bees.

After about twenty minutes Tony stopped, looking up at the vertical bank of the stream. It was an earthy wall, with numerous stout roots from the trees above sticking through in many places. Tony began to grab at the muddy roots, hauling himself up the twenty-foot precipice.

"I think we'll have to pull Brian up on the rope," Tim shouted up when Tony had reached the top. He took a length of worn rope and threw a knotted end up. At the third attempt, Tony caught it and tied it to a tree stump. After much struggling and curses, Brian finally made the top, leaving Tim to quickly and lithely ascend by the dangling rope. Brian was still gasping for breath as they all looked out from the grove of trees. "Well?" Tim asked.

Tony merely pointed and walked on across a field, climbing a rickety gate into the next. A notice stood a yard in from the gate, white with red lettering, now faded and blistered with time.

NO TRESPASSING

The arena they had entered fell away into a natural bowl shape, surrounded along its circular rim with a thick growth of hawthorn. So thickly did this grow that the gate made the only easy access into the place. Tony spread his hands. "What about that then..."

Tim and Brian gaped.

In the large depression not a thing grew, not one blade of grass was visible in its whole expanse. Instead, the ground was covered in a uniform layer of what looked like grey and black ashes and cinders. The boys stood at the very edge of this anomaly, where the ashy layer merged with the normal soil. The middle of the field contained the blackest layer, which had sooty nodes of things unrecognisable jutting out. Around this central area a penumbra of lighter greys confronted their astonished eyes.

"Wow!" was all Brian could utter.

Tim said, "Phew. Must've been a fire."

"Yeah," Brian muttered.

Tony stood back from them, silent, his arm resting on the gate. Then he said, "I thought that at first - about the fire and all - but how come none of these bushes got burned?"

The question was unanswerable, but the other two nevertheless gazed in amazement at the green, sturdy growth surrounding the strange field. There was not a scorch mark anywhere, not a blackened twig, nor a curled leaf.

The 'No Trespassing' sign creaked in a freak scurry of wind, making them all jump. "We shouldn't be here," Brian squeaked. "It says."

He began to climb back quickly over the gate, its rusty chain and padlock clanking. The others followed, readily obeying an unconscious need, a deep, deep awareness in them of something wrong. The bizarre place sat, like an acid-burned splotch on the landscape, like a festering sore on an otherwise smooth and healthy skin.

"Fantastic," Tony said, without the conviction of really knowing what he meant. Hastily making for the nearest road, they followed the lanes until they came to a small village - just a huddle of cottages and a solitary shop - where they bought some bread, sausages and bacon as well as bottles of lemonade.

"Where you come from, you boys?" The lady in the shop had asked.

Tim had been the spokesman. "Tindall Housing Estate. We're camping by Procter's farm."

"Well, you mind you don't get lost," she warbled pleasantly, then more seriously, her words spiked with a threat, "And don't you go getting into places that you shouldn't." Tim had the impression that the threat wasn't hers, but she didn't elaborate. "Countryside's a living thing," she went on, "got to take good care of it, boys. There's many a soul who thought little of the land who's felt the revenge of...things."

The boys were glad to leave the shop, its dark interior smelling of rose-wood and the warbling lady whose words held an almost tangible menace.

Tony had snorted as they walked down her crazy-paving path bordered with

a colourful array of flowers. He scuffed his shoe off the path, trampling several daffodils and immediately regretted doing it.

"What you do that for?" Brian hissed.

"Old bag, trying to scare us," Tony said moodily. "Bet she's a bloody witch!"

"Shhh," Tim gripped both their arms and ushered them quickly along the road. "She's watching from the window."

The day wore on finally, each of them enjoying their walks through groves of saplings, scattered among the riotous growth of ferns, and through dark woods of pines, damp-floored and tinted dusty blue with myriads of bluebells. They arrived back at camp exhausted, full of a day of mystery and happiness. Brian was so tired he could hardly grapple with the idea of cooking food, but eventually, tea, toast and sausages with tinned potatoes filled their grumbling stomachs. Darkness and the silence of night eventually descended on the three comrades, snug in their sleeping bags.

Tony woke with a start.

All was silent, the fabric of the tent above as black as the sky looming overhead. He noticed that both Brian and Tim were breathing evenly, asleep. Perhaps he had been dreaming, although he could remember no details of any dream.

The air was warm, stifling almost, and it would be good to get out of the tent for a while. The luminous hands of his watch registered three-thirty. Outside the tent the atmosphere was still warm, but at least a slight wind freshened it now and then. The sky was black with clouds. Tony breathed in deeply, his thoughts idly working through the previous day's exploits, but it was the strange field his thoughts kept coming back to, its weirdness had captured his imagination. As the cloud-cover began to clear a little, revealing the full moon, he was urged to go to the place, to see what it looked like under the radiance of that shining orb.

He hardly bothered to look back.

Trotting, he came breathless to the stream, its water silvered before it ran under the bridge at Dark Lane. Instead of navigating the ravine as it wound through the country, he took off up the humped rise of the surrounding meadows, cutting short the journey. The sky was clearing rapidly now, allowing the moon to light the way for him as he ran. Why he was running he didn't know, but his mouth gasped for air, his lungs sore with the strain. Finally he stopped. There ahead, beyond its camouflaging circle of Hawthorn bushes, loomed the arena-like depression of the dead field.

The Dead Field.

He toyed with the name he had himself conjured up for it. It was dead, after all, since nothing grew there. As he staggered the last few yards to the creaking gate with its ominous warning sign, Tony noticed something new. At first he couldn't decide whether it was the moonlight streaming down or some sort of light issuing upwards. When he reached the gate, clinging to it in breathless exhaustion, he realised that it was a light from the ground, for there came from the flaked and grey ash a bluish-tinged glow. It was a phosphorescence that drifted upwards several feet into the night before being ousted by the harsher silver of the moonlight.

The weird glow seemed to waft up and away from the place and as Tony's breathing became steadier and his eyes became accustomed to the sight that a richer flow of blood gave him, he felt suddenly cold. Although it was a warm night, the phosphorescent miasma which drifted up was cold.

Icy cold.

It seeped through his clinging woollen pullover and touched his skin like a palpable cold slime. He shivered, still staring hypnotically at the fantastic imagery of the ashy ground lit up by the unearthly blue tinge of drifting, opalescent mist. A siren-song seemed to caress the air around, almost indefinable as sound at all, but Tony, mesmerised, climbed over and walked immediately out on to the dead field. His shoes crunched on the deeply-layered, dry ash which constituted its surface. Ghostly puffs of the blue mist billowed up around his feet as he walked.

Out of the distant night sounds began to emerge.

"Tim!" A yell of fear. "Don't leave me in the dark!"

"Come on, Brian. He must've gone in that field. Gawd, what a chase." Tim's voice came between quickly drawn breaths. He reached the gate, crashing into it. The sound of stumbling footsteps behind in the darkness, Brian crashing to the floor by Tim.

"Why'd we have to come after Tony anyway. It's his hard luck if he gets lost..."

Tim wasn't interested and tugged Brian's arm hard. They both looked, Brian peering through the gap between the fence slats. He was not sure whether he could hear faintly the sound of singing, but he was sure he could see a cold blue light rising balefully, poisonously from the ash-grey floor and he certainly did see Tony for a few seconds, perhaps longer, as the fog-shrouded figure trudged down the incline towards the centre of the arena.

Then Tim screamed. Brian had never heard Tim do anything remotely like that, but since his own mouth was shrieking, "Tony!", he didn't have time to ponder on it.

For there, as the suddenly luminous Tony came upon the charred central disk in the dead field, he began to...collapse. His skin peeled off and shrivelled and his jutting bones fell away, his whole being becoming an awful, noisome pile of rottenness in the blackened, crumbled debris which caught the glimmering of both moon and luminescent mist. As the twitching body slumped, the blackened, flaking remains of numerous bones could be discerned, crisped by a cold, unearthly light that burned with a terrible and grim finality over the protruding white skeleton of its freshest victim.

Traveller's Fare [continued from p.29]

"Back at Pantasaph, I wrote a brief account for the Railway Company asking that I be informed if there was any reason to believe that my action had not been effective...but with rumours of wars in Europe, the Receiver had matters elsewhere, and the railway closed to all traffic that autumn. Grass and weeds took over the track and stations; then with wartime powers that swept aside all legal considerations, the line was requisitioned for scrap; the rails were torn up, and the buildings demolished. Nowadays the area is A National Park."

Father O'Connor looked at the dregs in his cup.

"I could do with another cup of tea; what about you? There is just time before our train comes in."

BAD BOYS AND VENGEFUL TOYS

Derrick Davies was a naughty young child,
In fact his parents declared him decidedly wild;
He ran from room to room screaming murderous noise,
While he smashed and scratched all his old and new toys.

Then one thundery, rainy night whilst lying abed,
He had a dream that filled him with dread.
In his red and white room meant for play,
His vengeful toys emerged for prey.

The rocking-horse rocked,
The playroom door instantly locked;
Soldiers and bears once so tame,
Stabbed and clawed intending to maim.

Derrick Davies awoke with a scream,
To be calmed by parents saying it was only a dream.
So in the morning on a bright and sunny day,
Derrick Davies once again started to play.

He ripped, he tore,
He battered and he swore,
Not noticing behind him,
The slowly opening cupboard door...



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